

According to globenewswire.com, global aquaculture generated 2018 revenues of \$271.66 billion, and is expected to grow to \$376.48 billion by 2025.

Well, unless it doesn't.

As marine fish stocks experience widespread decline, Big Aqua is rushing to fill the void with all manner of manufactured frankenfish. Nary a week passes without a new industry scheme for "growing" fish on land or in marine waters. Environmentalists have rightfully laid siege to Big Aqua for years, causing each new fish "farm" design to promise the world new, intoxicating environmental heights never before imagined.

Norway leads the industry pack. But after laying waste to large swaths of Norway's marine waters, Norwegian investors, venture capitalists, self-professed farmers and at least one convicted fraudster have set their sights on distant shores. And my home of Maine is right in their crosshairs.

The industry is salivating over the Pine Tree State. Cold, relatively clean water. Relatively cheap real estate. Cheap, mostly union-free labor with a reputation for tough, hard work. An unsurpassed eco-brand standing all alone in iconic L.L. Bean winter boots with glorious snow-covered Mt. Katahdin rising in the background. Ready access to vast East Coast markets - Maine is within a day's drive of 100 million hungry people. Water laws dating back to bucket baths. And a very pliant state government.

Ground zero for aquaculture's Maine invasion is my midcoast town of Belfast, where Nordic Aquafarms of Fredrikstad, Norway, wants to build a \$500 million land-based industrial fish farm. Since announcing in February 2018, Nordic has met with tenacious citizen opposition and has been mired in a swamp of its own arrogance and incompetence. Two and a half years after its expected construction start, Nordic still lacks an Army Corps of Engineers permit and its Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and Belfast Planning Board permits are both facing lengthy and well-financed appeals.

But the real kicker is a lawsuit over ownership of intertidal land Nordic needs for its saltwater intake and effluent discharge pipes in Belfast. The trial began June 22, and June 23 saw startling testimony from Nordic Chief Financial Officer Brenda Chandler. In sworn testimony, Chandler said Nordic's position is that ownership of the disputed intertidal land is "unclear."

In order to even apply for its DEP permit, Nordic had to establish "right, title and interest" (RTI) to all lands it needs for its Belfast project, but with Chandler's testimony now throwing that RTI into doubt, DEP may require Nordic to redo its entire application, the original of which ran to more than 1,000 pages - most or all of which was written by lawyers at \$300 an hour - and which took the better part of a year to process. With Nordic already a woefully behind in Belfast, this would be a huge blow.

That whole legal mess could have been avoided. While negotiating to run its pipes through the land of out-of-state summer residents Janet and Richard Eckrote, Nordic discovered that intertidal flats presumed to belong to the Eckrotes might actually belong to Eckrote neighbors and longtime Belfast residents Judith Grace and Jeffrey Mabee - who happened to be selling their waterfront home. But rather than buy the property, Nordic tried to save a few bucks by withholding its inconvenient discovery from licensing agencies.

But firebrand Nordic opponent and deed-and-title research whiz Paul Bernacki discovered Nordic's subterfuge. Nordic went to the PR mattresses, posting to its Facebook page a bizarroland statement saying it wasn't their place to say who owned what. Realizing the statement amounted to a land-grab confession, Nordic promptly took it down.

If Nordic loses the land ownership case, it is likely finished in Belfast, dealing a major blow to Nordic, which has hemorrhaged money in Belfast, and dealing a major setback to efforts by Maine Governor Janet Mills (D) to paint Maine as a place eager to disrobe for Big Aqua.

Mills' campaign to bend over for aquaculture was laid bare by emails I obtained under Maine's Freedom of Access Act. The emails reveal an inappropriate and perhaps illegal campaign to pressure the DEP to approve Nordic's permit application. The questionable effort was championed by Governor Mills' brother Peter Mills, executive director of the Maine Turnpike and wingman for various big-boy polluters, foreign and domestic.

The emails have found perch in the Nordic legal and permit frays and have been shared with enviro groups around the state who may use them as ammunition in current legal wars and or as grounds to reopen yesterday's lost battles.

Meanwhile Nordic's and Big Aqua's woes have spread well beyond Belfast Bay. Inspired by Nordic's Belfast foes, opponents of a similar Nordic operation in coastal Eureka, California have tapped Belfast activists for tips and information. And Maine activists in and around Bar Harbor and RV-infested Acadia National Park are rising up to challenge a sea-based Frenchman Bay project that - like every Big Aqua project - promises brand new cutting-edge technology cleaner than the snow atop Mount Katahdin.

And in Miami, Atlantic Sapphire, another Norwegian player, recently killed off fully 800,000 fish in the world's biggest land-based frankenfish factory because it failed to gauge how noise and vibration emanating from ongoing plant construction would devastate its fish, resulting in dead fish clogging up discharge pipes. It's hard to say who is more imbecilic here: Atlantic Sapphire, for building a keenly water-intensive operation in a state with more sinkholes than fresh water, or the State of Florida for allowing it.

Adding to Big Aqua's Maine woes was the recent defeat of LD1473, a bill that would have exempted land-based aquaculture projects from all state building and energy codes. Rather than take a scalpel to the codes, Big Aqua went after all of them - and failed in grand theatrical fashion. In an official legislative hearing, broadcast worldwide via Zoom, State Senator Kim Rosen of coastal Bucksport, 18 miles east of Belfast, read her bill while carefully sipping a joyfully announced late-afternoon cocktail. Within a few short words it was clear the properly lubricated Rosen had neither written the bill nor knew its content.

Indeed, in an email given to me by Rosen friend and LD1473 opponent Dr. Sid Block, Rosen wrote to Block: "this bill could have been written by the aquafarms!!!"

Armed with the email, I fired off a letter to The Bucksport Enterprise, whose editor, Don Houghton, told me Rosen was decidedly unaccustomed to such public thrashing. According to Houghton, Rosen protested post-publication that she thought her email to Block "was some sort of private correspondence." Apparently she was wrong.

No doubt smarting from the published letter, and facing a veritable storm of anti-LD1473 letters and emails, Rosen ran for cover. She pillow-killed her own baby, urging her previously giddy colleagues to snuff the bill - which they promptly did.

With LD 1473 now inhabiting a rotting Himalayan pile of abandoned and defeated bills, and with Big Aqua opposition stiffening in Frenchman Bay, a failed Nordic land grab in Belfast might cause global Big Aqua to think twice about Maine's vaunted but perhaps withering hospitality. And that would be a victory for Big Aqua opponents from Oslo to Eureka.

Lawrence Reichard is a freelance writer and editor who splits his time between Maine and Latin America. He can be reached at thedeftpen@gmail.com.